OPINION BEST OF THE WEB

The Gospel of St. Nick

Season's greetings from the New York Times.

By James Freeman Follow

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Longtime readers of the New York Times know that opinion columnist Nicholas Kristof can be prone to outlandish claims. Years ago he promoted the amusing idea that the biblical Jesus favored big government. In 2022 Mr. Kristof repeatedly insisted that he was legally eligible to run for governor of Oregon. Then in 2024 the columnist advanced an oddball theory about "collective responsibility" that seems to have caused something of a backlash among Times subscribers.

Now in the spirit of the season Mr. Kristof has lately been airing another speculation about the biblical Jesus. Given that, as he acknowledges, the notion rests upon "uncertainty stacked on uncertainty," one might wonder whether to publish it at all. But Mr. Kristof and his editors seem to have decided that a few days before Christmas was perfect timing to laud a forthcoming book, which he says "raises questions about the virgin birth of Jesus, even pointing to ancient evidence that Jesus might have been fathered by a Roman soldier, possibly by

rape."

The book's author, Elaine Pagels, is a Princeton historian of religion and Mr. Kristof interviews her in his column. Here's an excerpt, with Mr. Kristof's questions in bold:

> **The most startling element of your book to me was that you cite evidence going back to the first and second centuries that some referred to Jesus as the son of a Roman soldier named Panthera. These accounts are mostly from early writers trying to disparage Jesus, it seems, so perhaps they should be regarded skeptically. But you also write that Panthera appears to have been a real person. How should we think about this?**

> Yes, these stories circulated after Jesus' death among members of the Jewish community who regarded him as a false messiah, saying that Jesus' father was a Roman soldier. I used to dismiss such stories as ancient slander. Yet while we do not know what happened, there are too many points of circumstantial evidence to simply ignore them. The name Panthera, sometimes spelled differently in ancient sources, may refer to a panther skin that certain soldiers wore. The discovery of the grave of a Roman soldier named Tiberius Panthera, member of a cohort of Syrian archers stationed in Palestine in the first century, might support those ancient rumors.

> **You write that there were early accusations against Mary of promiscuity, connected to this allegation of an affair with Panthera. But you say that Roman soldiers brutally occupied Galilee in the period before Jesus was born, killing and raping with impunity. So, acknowledging that this is uncertainty stacked on uncertainty, if Panthera was involved, was it probably a case of rape?**

> Jewish revolutionaries, fighting "in the name of God and our common liberty" to free their land from Roman domination

> common liberty" to free their land from Roman domination, attacked a Roman fortress and killed many soldiers. The governor brought in Roman soldiers who crucified perhaps 2,000 Jews, then garrisoned thousands of soldiers less than four miles from Nazareth. The historian Josephus says that the soldiers stationed there ravaged the area, taking advantage of local people in every way they could. Josephus also notes that Galilean Jews were especially worried about their daughters' virginity. Noting such diverse evidence, I thought that these stories sounded plausible in a way I had never imagined.

As one can imagine, there are bound to be questions about the plausibility of such stories. While institutions of higher education may seem to be losing their ability to maintain free, open and respectful discourse, the good news this week is that at least on these particular questions there has been an active and friendly discussion on the Princeton campus.

Princeton's Robert George, a professor of jurisprudence and politics, responds to an email inquiry from this column and reports:

> Professor Pagels' general hypothesis has been talked up since a generation or two after the crucifixion of Jesus, and it's over a century since scholars began discussing her particular speculations and the latest of her data.

> Professor Pagels and I have been colleagues at Princeton for decades. We're friends, and she has on a couple of occasions kindly invited me to guest lecture in courses she was teaching. I myself am not a specialist in early Christianity, but a few years ago, I started an informal interdisciplinary discussion group here in Princeton—about 20 US and non-US scholars.

> Among the matters we scholars of religion, politics, law, philosophy, and history have examined together are critical-historical issues about the New Testament.

"None of her arguments makes a dent in the Gospels' testimony to the virginal conception of Jesus," writes Mr. George, who adds:

> Professor Pagels says she "used to dismiss as ancient slander" the story, circulated by early opponents of Christianity, that Jesus was fathered by a Roman soldier named Panthera. Now, however, she thinks "there are too many points of circumstantial evidence to simply ignore them." She makes three points (none of them ignored by scholars). "The discovery of the grave of a Roman soldier named Tiberius Panthera, member of a cohort of Syrian archers stationed in Palestine in the first century"; the stationing of uncontrolled Roman soldiery a few miles from Nazareth after the ferocious Roman repression of a Jewish revolt in that area; worries of Galilean Jews about their daughters' virginity.

> Something important, however, goes unmentioned, namely, that Ti. Panthera's grave was discovered in the 19th century, in Germany where his unit was stationed in the early 1st century. The grave's possible connection with the son-of-Panthera allegations was first discussed in 1906, by German scholars. It helps show how common the name Panthera was among Roman soldiers, making it an easy pick for early anti-Christian fabulists. But as was shown in 2020 by Christopher Zeichmann, a scholar of first-century Roman military postings (and, for what it's worth, someone who is very far from holding conservative or religiously orthodox opinions), there is no evidence—none at all—for the claim that Ti. Panthera and/or his unit of archers was "stationed in Palestine," ever; the highly improbable claim is, in Zeichmann's words, "a Russian doll of biblical scholars citing other biblical scholars, instead of concrete evidence or even the opinions of Roman military experts."

> What is more, the brief, uncharacteristic period when the Roman soldiery ran loose, somewhere in Gallilee or Judea, was *after King Herod's death*. So, even if these undisciplined men were in

> or near Nazareth, and included a rapist named Panthera, *everything* in the historical record places Jesus' conception and birth *during* Herod's reign, not after it.

What a fascinating discussion of the historical record. Perhaps the New York Times will consider covering it.

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James Freeman is the co-author of "The Cost: Trump, China and American Revival" and also the co-author of "Borrowed Time: Two Centuries of Booms, Busts and Bailouts at Citi."

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